

The Dragon Game

Lucasfilm Ltd. Games Division

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Remember, you saw it here first

I. Introduction

There is a game the wizards play, to prove which of them is the most powerful magician. It takes place in the mystic realm of Thera, an alternate plane of reality beyond the bounds of space and time, invisible to the eyes of man.

Wick, a young boy and the subject of our story, seeks to become an apprentice to the mighty wizard Taliesyn. He approaches the wizard's castle, enters the workshop (a very magical place, full of computers and magical paraphernalia), and asks what he can do to prove that he is worthy to be an apprentice.

Taliesyn replies: "For thousands of years, the test has been the same. When I release the magic energies of the Therasphere (gesturing to the large crystal ball in the center of the room), you and I and everything in this room, even the castle itself, will be changed.

"The castle will become a vast cavern full of unknown dangers, with a surprise at every turn. You and I, wizard and apprentice, will become dragons, as is the nature of a true magician. Every creature you meet will likewise be a part of the mystic realm, and also a part of the real world.

"I will set a path before you, so that you may find your way to the gate between worlds. On your way, you will pass through three levels, and meet three guardians. Each guardian will ask you for a word of power, which you must give him before he will let you pass. I will be waiting for you on the other side, after you pass the third guardian.

"To learn the words of power, you must leave the path and ask the creatures who live in the mystic cavern. Some of them may help you, but some will surely fight you. Beware, for there is great danger, but you can also learn many secrets that will help you in your quest. Also, do not stray too far from the path, or you will be lost forever.

"Nothing is as it seems. Learn to see with your heart, Wick, not with your eyes. Know this, and you will penetrate the secret of Thera."

II. Synopsis

The Dragon Game consists of a graphic introduction, four levels of game play and a conclusion (reward). The introduction is a short animated sequence against a fixed background (the wizard's workshop) that illustrates the story described above. The animation is extremely limited, and doesn't

permit interaction - it's designed simply to provide an entertaining visual element while the main part of the video game is being loaded from the disk.

The final part of the introduction will precipitate the game player into the first level. He will be presented with a third person view of the dragon standing at the beginning of the one true path. He will be in a small room which will allow free movement in all directions, to permit familiarization with the game controls (described later, in part III).

As the dragon leaves the entrance room, the point of view will switch to first person, and will stay that way until another creature (or a guardian) is encountered. Only left and right, forward and reverse movement will be permitted while the view is first person.

When a creature is encountered, the point of view will switch to third person, showing the creature and dragon facing each other in perspective. A menu of possible actions will be displayed, and the game will pause while the player selects an action. If the action involves leaving, or precipitates combat, the point of view will switch back to first person and the action will resume (in this context, third person means "not real time").

If the creature encountered is a guardian, and the required action is resolved successfully, the guardian will disappear and the tunnel behind it will open to reveal the next level. Once the dragon has passed through the gate, it will close again, barring exit back to the previous level.

On the second and third levels, the overall game play will be very similar to that of the first level. In fact, the creatures encountered on levels two and three are identical to the ones on level one. Actually, they are the same creatures.

This is an important point, since each creature's behavior is determined by heuristic weights applied to a small number of counters, which are incremented or decremented by the results of your interactions with the creature. Level one begins with all counters set to zero. Typically, one round of interaction will be sufficient to determine success or failure. On level two, however, the creature's "personality" will have already been colored by your actions on level one. Level three will likewise be dependent on levels one and two.

If and when the player gets past the third guardian, a fourth "bonus" level will be discovered, where the wizard (as the black dragon) will be waiting. The background on this level is intensely "magical", and doesn't make use of the fractal cave generator used on the previous levels. Therefore, the action will be significantly faster, and additional space will be available for cel graphics (by a factor of two or more), to provide an intense visual reward for having attained the highest level.

If the outcome of the final confrontation is successful, the player will be further rewarded with the endgame screen. This will be a carefully drawn full screen graphic, possibly with a minor animation or two to prevent it from looking static. It will only appear when the player has won the game, and will remain on the screen until the computer is reset or powered off.

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III. Dynamics

Most of the interaction in The Dragon Game will be accomplished by use of the joystick. In the "real time" (movement) phase, the stick is used in a very obvious way: pushing forward makes you go, pulling back makes you stop. Holding the stick forward (as opposed to pressing it forward and letting it go) makes you go faster. Holding the stick to the left makes you turn left at the next intersection, and holding it to the right makes you turn right. If you push the red button (sometimes referred to as the "trigger"), you will turn around and go the opposite direction.

This type of joystick interface is similar to that used in a number of popular arcade games, including Pac-Man. It greatly simplifies motion control, and allows the player to concentrate on strategy (or in this case, remembering where he is and where he's going). At the same time, it provides an unambiguous frame of reference - forward is always ahead, left and right are visually correct, and turning around is distinguished from "stop", and is also consistent with the "menu" (interaction) phase.

When a creature (or guardian) is encountered and the view point shifts to third person, a menu of possible actions will be displayed on the lower half of the screen. The player will then select an appropriate action by moving the joystick, and will execute the action by pressing the button. The default action (if the stick is not moved) will be "turn around and leave". By making this the default, we avoid the problem of what happens when the button is pressed too soon (that is, before the menu comes up), as the result is the same as the default action during the movement phase.

The menu will always include five basic actions:

1. turn around and leave (default)
2. give the creature something
3. act neutral (or do nothing)
4. take something from the creature
5. attack the creature

Each of the possible actions will be worded in a manner appropriate to the creature and/or situation. It is possible for additional actions to be listed in certain special situations, but these five seem to be sufficient at the moment.

In all cases, what the creature wants (if it wants anything at all), and what it has to give you (if it has anything to give you) is one and the same - a word of power. This is the basic unit of exchange in The Dragon Game. These words can be neither created nor destroyed (within the scope of the game), but they can be possessed, and they can be used.

Menu selections 2 and 5 both require you to select a word (from your list of accumulated words, which will be on the screen at all times). Both of them also require you to give up the word you have selected. Option 2 means that you are giving the word to the creature, which is the same as giving it money, food or treasure in a conventional dungeon. This almost always makes friends with (or appeases) the creature, but it costs you.

Option 5 allows you to use the word to cast a magic spell, which releases its power and directs it automatically toward the creature. It will be possible for the creature to dodge (or counter-attack), but some will be better at this than others (especially on the higher levels). If the creature escapes the attack and is angry enough to counter-attack, it will get a free swing at you - which you will have to dodge. This process can be repeated until you win, lose or run out of magic words.

Each of the possible actions will have a different effect on the creature. The exact nature of the effect will be pre-determined in a general sense, as each of the options will have a fixed weight associated with it, for each of the several behavioral state counters. The action is cumulative, however - so the effect will only be deterministic the first time you encounter a particular creature. Beyond that, it will be related to the sum of all of your previous actions, plus your current response. Whether it is a simple algebraic sum or some more complex function is a design decision that can best be determined after the first trial implementation.

The behavior patterns of the various creatures need not be very complex for the game to be interesting. What will best determine the fun of game play (in my opinion) will be the chains of action and reaction that can be developed from even the most trivial series of interactions. Every action must have at least one consequence, good or bad. For instance, if you make friends with the troll, you may automatically become the enemy of the biter bird. If you are foolish enough to give a word of power to the puffer bird, it may turn around and blow it back in your face.

It will not be possible to get through any level (even the first one) without interacting with at least two of the creatures. This is partially to stimulate entertaining game play, but also partially to insure that the behavioral weights are "stirred up" in interesting ways, to make the higher levels more complex. All we need do to make the game teach a valuable lesson is to make certain you won't get through the highest level without getting something that you need very much - from your worst enemy.

This approach is also consistent with the fiction of the game world, in that young Wick is being tested for qualification as an apprentice, by a master magician. It is likely that the magician would arrange things (behind the scenes) in precisely the way that would use Wick's mistakes against him, both to allow him to realize his error in judgement, and to overcome it. Anyone who knows the personalities of the creatures inside and out, and has a good feeling for the interactions between them, should be allowed to walk relatively unimpeded through the labyrinth and win the prize. Plus or minus an unexpected surprise or two, that is. After all, wizards aren't perfect.

IV. Summary

That's it. Pretty neat, huh?

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